

CBC's Coroner cuts deep into mental illness

Vancouver actress finds humanity in nuanced crime procedural role



Vancouver-born actress Serinda Swan stars in the CBC drama *Coroner*.

Jenny Cooper isn't a real person, but you wouldn't know it from the way Serinda Swan talks about her.

"I love Jenny's strength," Swan says. "I love her weakness. I love her exploration of who she is."

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The Vancouver-born actress portrays Dr. Jenny Cooper on *Coroner*, the

CBC's Toronto-shot crime procedural based on the series of books by British novelist Matthew Hall. *Coroner* — which premiered earlier this month — follows the personal and professional exploits of Dr. Cooper in the aftermath of her husband's unexpected death.

Swan's filmography includes plum roles in *Marvel's Inhumans*, *Ballers*, *Smallville* and *Graceland*. But she's breaking new ground and having the time of her life in Jenny's coroner scrubs — and in lifting the character beyond the usual crime procedural clichés.

"This is one of the first jobs that actually lets me explore my artistry, as opposed to just being a commodity," Swan says. "A lot of my roles in the past have been very shiny — 'You can be as good of an actor as you want, but make sure you're pretty' — and this was the first one where I was like, 'Yeah, OK, so I'm going to do a really ugly cry face, or you know what's not going to be cute? This angle of my face, because I put on weight for the show and I feel frumpy and weird and that's her life right now, that's how she is.'"

What Swan loves most about Jenny is the fact that — unlike most on-screen characters but exactly like living, breathing human beings — she contains multitudes. Jenny's a recent widow, an ER doctor turned coroner, a mom and a trauma survivor who relies on Ativan and therapy to manage her panic attacks.

Jenny's panic attacks often rear themselves during inopportune moments, like in Monday's episode, when she's newly arrived at the scene of a homicide.

"In that scene, I'm completely incapacitated, and then I'm completely capable, because I get on a phone call and talk to my colleague," Swan says. "There's still capability, and there's still a human being that can have all these emotions and one doesn't cancel out the other. She can still be a coroner and be professional while her personal life is falling apart. She can

still be very strong in her personal life while her professional life is falling apart. It's not one or the other."

We've heard that representation matters with regards to cultural identity, sexual orientation and gender — and it matters in the realm of mental health, too. *Coroner's* nuanced depiction of mental illness is already impacting a lot of viewers, according to Swan, who notes that she's received feedback from fans who appreciate her accurate portrayal of panic attacks and PTSD.

"We're not making it melodramatic, or putting Sarah McLachlan music behind it," she says.

Swan's time in Jenny's shoes has taught her a lot about her own flesh and bones. "I think I could be a coroner," she says. "Apparently internal organs and the workings of the body are very intriguing to me. I saw an actual autopsy to prepare myself for this role, and I was enthralled with the body and it made me realize, for 34 years I've been in this body but I really have no idea what's going on in it, and how the interior is so much more important than the exterior."

Coroners perform a beautiful service in society, Swan says. "They're the undertakers, but they're also the dignity-holders. They give dignity to these deceased beings."

"I also learned that I really hate maggots, so that was fun," she adds.

Coroner also stars Vancouver actor Roger Cross (*Continuum*, *Dark Matter*) as a detective who works with Jenny to solve murders; Ehren Kassam (*Degrassi: Next Class*) as Jenny's teenaged son; and Quebec actor Éric Bruneau as Jenny's lover, a war vet who lives in a tree house and, like the coroner, wrestles with the effects of past trauma.

***Coroner* airs Mondays at 9 p.m. on CBC Television. Stream *Coroner* anytime at cbc.ca/coroner.**

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